

July 30, 2020

RE: RI Department of Children, Youth, and Families Budget

Chairman Marszalkowski and Members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Human Services,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of our 39 community-based member organizations who provide and advocate for a range of family support and strengthening, child welfare, behavioral health, education, sexual assault, disability, and healthcare services to children, youth, and their families. We appreciate the challenge before you in facing the triple threats of health and economic crises caused by COVID-19 as well as the national crisis of systemic racism.

The Department of Children, Youth, and Families is a critical entity that plans for and ensures the availability of services to support children and youth ages 0-21 and their families in the areas of family preservation, out of home care, children's behavioral health, supports in cases of disability, young adult transitions from foster care, and juvenile justice. These functions are always essential and have proven especially valuable in protecting and serving children and their families during the pandemic. We strongly support the Department, and believe the Department needs more resources to accomplish its challenging mission. We are partners in provision of services, and support many aspects of the proposed budget, as we understand it, but would like to make a few overarching and then a few specific points:

- **DCYF oversees a public-private system.** Virtually every child who comes into contact with DCYF child protective staff or family caseworkers has one or more community-based organizations that work directly with the children and their families. Our members work to identify, prevent, and/or intervene in crises, support foster care and residential treatment, and to reunify the family or move the children into permanent homes or transition to independence. The children and families with the most challenging profiles are largely supported by private organizations. Additional staffing needs within DCYF should not come at the expense of investments in community-based agencies.
- **Critical shifts in funding should not be made on the brief experience since March 2020.** DCYF will be implementing a new foster care system August 1st with a tiered level of need structure and payments for all foster families moving in-house. The system has not been piloted, and some concerns have been raised by current foster parents. No further programmatic shifts should be implemented at this time. We know the stress on families will continue as the pandemic rages on and do not know what the impact will be on need for supportive home-based services or out of home care. In the case of residential facilities, the state should not lose access to buildings and programs that could be needed or repurposed for the future.
- **Transparent rate-setting and cost-based contracting systems are needed to stabilize nonprofit service delivery.** Nonprofits will always leverage philanthropic funds to supplement their work,

but the state should not expect that they can provide required services below cost. Agencies' costs have skyrocketed during the pandemic with tens of thousands of dollars of new and unreimbursed costs incurred monthly for PPE, telemedicine and distance learning staffing and equipment, supplies for families, hazard pay, sanitizing, and containment/isolation rooms in residential programs, etc. Very little state relief has been forthcoming. Costs are far exceeding contracted rates paid in FY '20 and combined with the loss of fundraising revenue, the sector is at great risk with most agencies having minimal operating capital -in some cases as little as four weeks- on hand. New funds that come through pandemic federal stimulus should be directed to private agencies as well as gaps in the public sector budget. Without further assistance, organizations will be crippled if not lost to the state.

- **It critical that there be more transparency and oversight of outcomes for services to determine cost-benefit and address racial inequities.** DCYF has brought services for youth in transition in-house and is planning to build out its foster care unit. The YESS program which ably served young people for many years will sunset this summer. DCYF is becoming more responsible for its own service provision as well as oversight of all services. We believe that transparent evaluation of program performance and outcomes for both public and private providers is critical. We believe that collection of performance outcome data, evaluation of said data, and public reporting is critical to determining the cost-benefit of public versus community-based services as well as ongoing race equity issues. Funding for ongoing third-party evaluation of DCYF and private provider services should be in the budget.

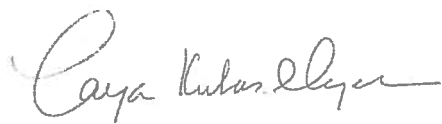
Specific Programmatic Comments:

- RICCF testified in favor of financing to support investments in the RITCHIST data system. We continue to support this investment. Ideally the data in the new system will be accessible to private organizations as well as DCYF staff.
- The long-awaited foster care system changes will begin to go into effect on August 1st. The new system is based on a tiered level of need and related rate payment structure ranging from \$24/day for the lowest need and youngest children to \$65 for those with significant behavioral health challenges. The accuracy and viability of the tier system has not been tested in a pilot program and we believe many more children should be scored in a higher tier due to the trauma they have experienced.
 - The payment system is moving completely into DCYF. Foster care agencies will no longer be involved in payments, only recruitment and direct supportive services. The rates for all parents are now equal, but they may not meet the unequal needs of families in the system.
 - As advocates for children and families, we believe it is critical that families be provided an appropriate package of assistance- especially during this critical time- including sufficient allocations for clothing, material goods, activities, distance learning support, and respite breaks. We are concerned that the low tier rates are insufficient to keep children fed and engaged especially during the pandemic.

- We do not know if foster youth will be able to return or remain in school in the year ahead. We are especially concerned about the need for educational supports for children and families with learning challenges.
- Finally, the new system will require families to transition from weekly or biweekly payments by community agencies to monthly payments by the state. The initial payment is expected to take up to six weeks, and we are concerned that children and families will suffer during this period. We believe there should be one extra transition payment to help families adjust to the new system.
- Isolation units at Zabarano hospital and a short-term crisis intervention and quarantine program at Tappan Street have been important programs during the pandemic that should continue. Funds for these pandemic-specific services come from COVID-19 specific sources, not redirected from other parts of the DCYF budget.
- At this point in the pandemic there has been a measurable reduction in congregate care placements as some youth have moved back into the community with family or foster families. These programs serve both child welfare and behavioral health needs of youth. New investments may be needed in community-based family supports to keep youth at home post-pandemic; residential program providers know the families and may be able to transition to in-home supports or youth may need periodic short-term breaks from home to stay in the community. It is premature to lose these programs and buildings and redirect that funding. The FY '21 budget needs to include funding to maintain residential staff and facilities until we are successfully through the pandemic and clear on the needs of children and youth through the crisis and beyond. Programs may be converted to permanent housing or other uses if no longer needed on the other end. It is extremely challenging to site and stand up new residential facilities once lost.
- A girls' residential program, removed from the Juvenile Justice budget this spring, is desperately needed to meet the behavioral health needs of girls and reduce or eliminate their census in the Rhode Island Training School. This program should be restored to the budget for FY '21.

We thank you for your consideration of these issues. Finally, we note the removal of the requirement for Accreditation from the FY '20 budget and reiterate our recommendation for funding for third-party evaluation of DCYF systems and a robust and transparent stakeholder review process in the FY '21 budget.

Respectfully,



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Executive Director